



## Director's Opinion Terry Cleveland

“Collectively, more is now being done to manage brucellosis in Wyoming than ever before.”

**B**rucellosis in Northwest Wyoming is a politically charged and incredibly complex problem that isn't confined to a single species, industry or agency. Scientific and political issues further complicate the problem, putting two of Wyoming's important and visible industries, Wyoming elk and wild bison herds and the cattle industry, in direct conflict.

Brucellosis has existed in Wyoming since the late 1800s. No one knows how the disease came to Wyoming, but many believe it was introduced to the Yellowstone area through infected bison imported by a local cattle ranch. This highly infectious disease affects elk, bison and cattle, causing females to abort their calves.

If brucellosis were only a wildlife problem, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department would be prepared and empowered to manage for the disease. Healthy elk and wild bison populations can be maintained in spite of the presence of the disease. The significance of brucellosis is the economic impact that brucellosis outbreaks have on cattle operations.

Wyoming lost its brucellosis class-free status in February 2004 following a series of outbreaks in cattle herds in the northwest corner of the state, which were likely the result of contact with infected elk.

In addition to the economic and genetic losses incurred by individual producers following extensive testing and culling of their herds, Wyoming's reputation as a source of healthy, disease-free cattle took a hit. The costs associated with this situation have been reported as exceeding \$5 million.

Managing the disease is not straightforward. Vaccines used to help prevent brucellosis are imperfect for cattle and even less effective in elk and bison. Cattle producers have adopted improved management strategies such as testing, tracing and removing infected animals, improved calving practices and vaccination of eligible heifers. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department uses ballistic “bio-bullets” to vaccinate elk on state and federal winter elk feedgrounds. The vaccine is not preventing infection, although

abortions may be reduced in elk.

Potential solutions to the brucellosis problem will affect and involve a wide variety of groups and individuals—ranchers, sportsmen and other wildlife enthusiasts, conservation groups, state and federal agencies and others. Governor Freudenthal formed a team representing a wide range of interests to tackle the brucellosis problem, with special emphasis on four topics: 1) reclaiming brucellosis class-free status for cattle, surveillance and reduction of transmission between species; 2) developing a road map of what to do in the event of a new case in cattle; 3) addressing human health concerns; and 4) reducing, and eventually eliminating, brucellosis in wildlife, specifically addressing winter elk feedgrounds.

The Governor's brucellosis team presented its final report in January of this year. The report included 28 recommendations designed to do more toward the elimination of brucellosis than ever before. They include developing brucellosis management action plans for elk and wild bison herds in northwest Wyoming, promoting research about new diagnostic methods and vaccines, increasing testing and surveillance, reducing the prevalence of brucellosis in elk and wild bison herd units, improving habitats, increasing public education, potential legislation prohibiting the private feeding of elk and wild bison and much more.

One of the more controversial actions recommended in the report is a five-year test program that will involve trapping elk on the Muddy Creek winter elk feedground and the other two feedgrounds in the Pinedale herd unit and annually removing an estimated 80 infected animals from the herd in an attempt to reduce disease prevalence in that herd unit. Another recommended action involves evaluating opportunities to modify, merge or phase out one or more winter elk feedgrounds as part of ongoing assessments required by the locally developed brucellosis management action plans. While these two actions are sure to draw the most attention, they are just two of the tools identified in the comprehensive and multi-faceted plan



Brucellosis management action plans are being developed for feedground elk herd units in western Wyoming. These plans will provide management guidelines to reduce disease transmission in elk and cattle. *Photo by WGFD staff*

for dealing with the disease.

A variety of agencies and organizations, including the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, are implementing the recommendations of the Governor's Brucellosis Coordination Team. Relying on sound scientific information and extensive experience in the field to protect the interests of our wildlife, Game and Fish wildlife managers have been, and will continue to be, involved in every step of the process. On the ground, Game and Fish personnel are documenting brucellosis rates on elk winter feedgrounds by trapping elk and collecting blood samples. A new study to improve the accuracy of brucellosis testing in elk began at Grey's River feedground this year. Studies for documenting habitat use in relation to brucellosis seroprevalence rates will begin in 2006.

The department's Brucellosis Habitat Feedground program is using habitat improvements to disperse elk on winter range and thereby reduce the risk of brucellosis transmission. Prescribed fire or mechanical treatments are used in most habitat improvements. New treatments are scheduled for areas adjacent to feedgrounds in the Jackson/Pinedale Region. Collectively, more is now being done to manage brucellosis than has ever occurred in Wyoming.

It would be easy to sit back and say eradicating brucellosis should be left to the agriculture industry—after all,

wildlife herd units are easily managed and suffer no long-term effects from the disease. At the same time, livestock producers could argue they've all but eliminated brucellosis in cattle and point to elk and wild bison as the last remaining reservoirs of the disease. The fact is, brucellosis isn't going anywhere unless we pull together to combat it. The economics of the issue affect us all. It's time for Wyoming to demonstrate to our neighboring states and the federal government that we can, and will, recognize the problems and work aggressively to fix them on our own terms.

The Governor's Brucellosis Coordination Team is an example of the right approach to take—stakeholders working together to move beyond polarized attitudes and find potential solutions. Only with cooperation and collaboration from interest groups and state and federal agencies and with the support of the public can we accomplish our goal of understanding and combating this disease.

If eliminating brucellosis were easy, it would have been done years ago. Because of its impacts on livestock, wildlife and the state's economy, it is vital we do everything in our power to deal with the disease and search for solutions. I am confident through the collective efforts of the brucellosis coordination team, stakeholders and the public, we can make a real difference and meet the brucellosis challenge head-on.

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